OPP reviewing request for criminal probe into Ontario nursing homes

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The Hawthorne Place Care Centre in Toronto on May 26, 2020.

FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Ontario Provincial Police says it is examining whether a criminal probe is warranted into nursing home residents who died from neglect during the pandemic.

In a letter to NDP Leader Andrea Horwath on Monday, OPP Commissioner Thomas Carrique says he is reviewing a request from her to investigate the deaths.

The Globe and Mail has reported that dozens of residents in two Toronto nursing homes hit hard by the coronavirus died not from COVID-19 but from dehydration and neglect.

Canadian military reports obtained by The Globe reveal for the first time that causes other than COVID-19 hastened the deaths of residents in Downsview Long Term Care Centre and Hawthorne Place Care Centre, as outbreaks spiralled out of control and staffing collapsed.

Representatives of both homes challenged the reports, saying no residents died of dehydration.

Ms. Horwath asked during Question Period on Monday when Long-Term Care Minister Merrilee Fullerton first became aware that seniors in nursing homes had died from neglect during the early stages of the pandemic.

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Ms. Fullerton was not in the legislature, leaving Government House Leader Paul Calandra to field questions on her behalf.

“The chief coroner has been engaged,” he said. “We’ve asked for full documents with respect to all the deaths in long-term care.”

It is not clear whether coroner investigations have been launched into any deaths. Stephanie Rea, a spokeswoman for the Office of the Chief Coroner, or OCC, said it is up to the long-term care home to report deaths and identify any circumstances that need to be investigated. But she declined to say whether that has, in fact, happened.

The owner of one of the homes cited in the military reports pushed back on Monday, denying that any residents died from dehydration.

The Canadian Armed Forces says in one of its reports that 26 residents at Downsview Long Term Care Centre died from dehydration before a military team arrived last June to provide

humanitarian and medical support.

The information is “false,” James Balcom, chief operating officer of GEM Health Care Group, a Halifax-based, for-profit company that owns Downsview, said in a statement.

Mr. Balcom said the company fully co-operated with the OCC and reviewed its records from last year. “We are confident that this information will be confirmed by the OCC with the Ontario Ministry of Long-Term Care.”

Sixty-five residents of Downsview died of COVID-19 last spring, ranking the home the third-hardest-hit in Ontario. It was also the first long-term care home in the province to be temporarily managed by a hospital.

Barbara Collins, chief executive officer of Humber River Hospital, testified at the independent commission that examined the devastating impact of the coronavirus on residents in long-term care homes about the state of emergency at Downsview.

Staff from Humber River arrived at the home on April 23 and formally took over management on May 30. Only 60 per cent of the staff were working. The rest were either sick with COVID-19 or too terrified to come into work, Ms. Collins said. The 50 family members who normally came to the home twice a day to help feed residents were not allowed to visit because of pandemic restrictions.

“There was a lot of death,” Ms. Collins testified. “And some of that was food and water, and if your condition has deteriorated as a result of food and water challenges, you probably cannot fight COVID.”

At Hawthorne, 51 residents died of COVID-19 in the 269-bed facility. The military says it suspects those fatalities pale in comparison to deaths from other causes. “Residents are dying from non-COVID-19 causes more than they should be.”

Nicola Major, a spokeswoman for Responsive Group Inc., the company that manages the for-profit home, said in an e-mail to The Globe that the military did not bring any issues to the attention of management. As well, she said, none of the death certificates issued for residents cites neglect, dehydration or malnutrition as a cause of death.

The military was deployed to seven homes in Ontario last year, including Downsview and Hawthorne, at the request of Premier Doug Ford.

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